

Youth and Urban Farming

Panelists:

Jess Liborio (moderator) – Programs & Community Outreach Manager for The Food Project's Greater Boston Region

Tamika Francis – Executive Director of The MOVE

– I grew up in Jamaica. Farming had been the only thing I knew. I wasn't sparked when I was cut off from farming.

Cristal Martinez – Youth leader at Roxbury Environmental Empowerment Project

– We work with the city to find places for city gardens.

Chad McClain – Youth leader at YouthGROW

– Youth Grow promotes youth empowerment and leadership development. My first day I was really nervous, but then I fell in love with the program. I wanted to go back everyday.

Tyler Martin – Junior staff at Gardening the Community in Springfield, MA

– I've been involved with Gardening the Community for three years.

Zeke Mercer-McDowall – The Food Project

– The Food Project brings youth and adults together to build a sustainable food program. I didn't have many job opportunities open to me, but the Food Project starts hiring at fourteen, so I applied and I stayed. I found I like being involved in the community.

What does your organization do? Who do you involve? Has your organization faced any resistance?

Tamika – We target middle and high school students as well as urban dwellers and minority groups as a way for them to purposefully stay connected to the land and show their wisdom of working with the land.

Cristal – We target youth and the family, both old and young.

Chad – We target the whole community through our block party. We grow, harvest and sell the food. We want an affordable place for food in the community.

Tyler – We have five or six sites at Gardening the Community. We get a share of food from a farm nearby and deliver the food or allow people to come pick it up.

Zeke – The Food Project targets everybody. Everyone interested in community service is welcome to come work.

What is it that intrigues you about your work? What can I do to make other students interested in this work?

Chad – It wasn't my interest at first. Once you learn what people have to go through to get food on the table, you want to help more. We learned about how much goes into making our food, such as how much water goes into making a pound of beef. We also have retreats where we can talk about both school and farming. To get more youth involved, you need to offer opportunities, such as networking.

Zeke – You set the tone. If you make it fun and relatable and present it as something relevant to youth, they will be interested. It's a matter of how you set the tone.

You are leaders in your community. How do you see your experience affecting your community? How do you talk about social change?

Tamika – Our work is to inspire people to demand good food for your community and knowledge to make better choices.

Cristal – I want to see people have access to healthier food. I want the community to take more responsibility because they deserve it.

What is your favorite and least favorite thing about urban agriculture?

Chad – I like seeing the look on people's faces that they can get good food at affordable prices. My least favorite part is working in the hot sun.

Tyler – My favorite part is providing the food at affordable prices. My least favorite part is also working in the hot sun.

Cristal – Making the gardens is my favorite part. My least favorite part is seeing people eat their vegetables because I hate vegetables.

Zeke – Seeing the smiles of the people your helping- they have so much gratitude. We're giving them access to healthy food right in their back yard. I also like that we are able to come together over food. My least favorite part is when we shut down because that means snow.

Are you thinking about staying in agriculture when you get older?

Chad – Not really. I will always have the skills and wherever I go, I hope to keep helping in farms.

Zeke – I've set up the knowledge to be more of a backup plan.

Jess – We're really happy to see people go into agriculture, but also as leaders in other jobs as well.

Do you all hold leadership positions in your organizations?

Chad – I'm the assistant youth coordinator as a junior staff. I'm there as someone people can talk to for help.

Cristal – We all have equal authority

Tyler – I am a board member at Gardening the Community.

Do you see behavior change around these issues?

Cristal – It's not a popular conversation with my friends. To talk to your peers about it, you have to do something that would catch them and get them involved.

Chad – You can just try to fit it in when you see something you learned about. I encourage my friends not to go to Burger King, but they don't listen to me.

Has it changed the way you eat?

Zeke – I used to guzzle Arizona's. At the Food Project they don't tell you not to eat things, but encourage you to consider everything that's in it.

Tamika – We have found that 75% of youth said it changes the way they think about food.

What in our current food system do you think most needs to be changed?

Zeke – That's a hard question. The food system is broken. If you change one thing, what's that going to affect? You can't just shut everything down and start over. If you find one thing to fix, well then what?

Cristal – You see the difference between wealthier communities with Whole Foods and poorer communities with corner stores that have bad produce.

Chad – People need to read up on what's healthy and not healthy, because it's not always what we think.

Tamika – Personal, community and environmental health needs are all met when we change food.

How do you get past the stigma that youth have that physical labor is not cool?

Zeke – I don't get ridiculed for working on a farm. It's more like you're a superhero or some sort of survivalist.

Chad – It depends on who you hang around with. You just have to focus on the bigger picture and what you are trying to achieve.

One thing I want to see more of in urban farming is...

Tyler – I want to see healthier eating habits in all communities.

Chad – I want to see more youth involvement.

One thing that makes me hopeful is...

Cristal – One thing that makes me hopeful is how intergenerational this movement is.

Zeke – One thing that makes me hopeful is all of this. Seeing the youth have a voice in this movement.